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**THE CURRENT MIX OF POLITICS AND
RELIGION IN AMERICAN LIFE:
A SOCIOLOGICAL TREATISE**

**IN HONOR OF A SCHOLAR, COLLEAGUE, AND FRIEND
ON HIS 60TH BIRTHDAY
DR. FELEKY GABOR**

CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERAL ROLE PLAYING

In the USA, we assume conservatives and liberals each have their roles to play. We do recognize and affirm that conservatives (those generally predisposed to resist change) have an important place in society. Humans, cross-culturally, seem to be predominantly resistant to change and most comfortable with the status-quo. It may even be said that conservatives are not now, never have been, nor ever will be an endangered species. In fact, the difficulty with getting any social movement accomplished is that most people do not want to be moved!

This comfort with the status-quo is not inherently bad. Without it, sociologists tell us that there would be insufficient social organization for an orderly society. Without a majority of people wanting to stay put where they are and keep working as they are, the consequent social change would likely lead to more social disorganization than a society could long endure. In short, we need conservatives and appreciate the social stability they bring to our culture.

But we also need liberals (those generally predisposed to freely encourage and support change) to balance, to challenge, and to inspire those who are comfortable with things as they are. Liberals almost always constitute a minority for the reason mentioned above. Liberals constitute a continuing “endangered species” because their disposition toward change confounds the majority, frightens some, worries many, and often challenges predominant societal assumptions. It may be easier not to have liberals around, but without such balance and impetus toward change, social life would stagnate.

BEING RIGHT, RIGHTEOUS, AND RUNNING

The last few decades have brought significant religious change to the culture of the USA. Part of that change involves a subgroup of conservatives that has invaded and infected two great American arenas – religion and politics. This subgroup of *fundamentalistic conservatives* (characterized by rigid adherence to selected principles, by intolerance of other views, and by opposition to secularism) came into substantial power with the election of Ronald Reagan. Most are Christians, but some are not. Often they are called the “religious right.” I use the term *fundamentalistic* in its dictionary meaning of “hypocritically and excessively” fundamental. They were and still are mostly led by a relatively small group of preachers and political strategists (and a few other self-appointed religious “experts”) who are working together to secure control of all facets of American life.

The primary vehicle by which they are seizing power across a broad spectrum of American life is religion. It is religion that is a primary and protected social institution, within which we learn our foundational values and beliefs. Religion, as a social institution, and its related values have now been exploited for over three decades. Whether those values relate to us personally or in the form of our civil religion (loving our country), these *fundamentalistic conservatives* have woven together the flag and the cross in a form of unholy commingling that has broken and segmented the heart of America.

The historical roots – In the first half of the twentieth century, much of the USA was fully but gently engaged in the struggle between the fundamentals of the Judeo-Christian faith and the enemy called modernism. While many fundamentalists would trace their roots back to the Christian New Testament, the brand of American fundamentalism about which I am speaking can be traced back to the 19th century. If you grew up in a Republican (typically conservative) family you were sensitized to issues of morality. If you grew up in a Democratic (typically liberal) family, you were sensitized to issues of justice. Republican families were steeped in an ideal culture of hard work, going to church, and personal character. Democratic families were socialized to prioritize the values of diversity and the equitable sharing of the earth’s resources. While these were not absolute in character, and likely there was a good bit of blending in families on these issues, these predominant perspectives set the stage for today’s happenings. It is the “protestant ethic” (being punctual, hard-working, deferring gratification, and prioritizing work) defined by Max Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, Allen and Unwin: Cornwall,

1930) that characterized the Republicans of the time and, in fact, identified the predominant norm in the culture for at least a century.

In that same general timeframe, the cultural impact of a series of twelve tracts written between 1910 and 1915 and titled *The Fundamentals* was well established. These fundamentals included the belief that the Bible was without error, that the world was created in six 24 hour days, that the Bible was accurate in matters of science and history, that Jesus was divine and of virgin birth, and that Jesus died on a cross to redeem humankind and would return to judge at the second coming. Some also believed that the King James Version of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures was the only correct translation.

Also at the same time that *The Fundamentals* were written and published, the same people that adhered to these beliefs were beginning to feel displaced by the recurring waves of southern and eastern European immigrants. These immigrants were predominantly not Protestants and became the impetus for the predominantly northern European whites (sometimes called the “old stock whites”) to feel betrayed by their leaders. They felt that our leaders had led our nation into a war with Germany that never was adequately resolved but did introduce us (an unintended consequence) to the “evils” of biblical criticism which began in Germany. Biblical criticism is the examination of the literary origins and historical values of the books composing the Bible. This feeling of betrayal quickly led to criticism of the teaching of evolution in our schools and the perceived elitism of professionalized educators who, in their minds, seemed to scorn traditional family values.

So it was already in the 1920’s that battles were being pursued through the courts, the state legislatures, and their various denominations. The now famous “Monkey Trial” took place during this time (1925) in Dayton, Tennessee. The fundamentalist, William Jennings Bryon, was opposed by the atheist, Clarence Darrow. The results were mixed and the effects linger to this day. It was here also that the first of many general conventions of mainline Protestant denominations found themselves in conflict between the fundamentalists and the modernists.

This type of *fundamentalistic conservatism* continued to grow in the 1930’s with the establishment of parochial schools, colleges, seminaries, and missionary societies. They also moved into areas of media to share their beliefs and concerns, especially into the print and radio media. During this time, the rise of “parachurch” organizations began, seeking to meet the needs of specific cohorts of people. They were also deeply committed to passing this system of beliefs on to their children. So what began before World War I, grew thereafter to produce huge pentecostal,

charismatic, and evangelical movements after World War II, and set the stage for the fundamentalistic conservatives of our day.

Contemporary realities—A look at the more immediate past finds the fundamentalists greatly affected by the massive cultural changes of the 1960's: the women's liberation movement, the sexual revolution, the youth movement colloquially called the "hippies," the civil rights movement, the Vietnam anti-war movement, and the rise of numerous alternative religions (Moonies, Hari Krishna, etc.). Many people were not supportive of such dramatic cultural shifts.

At the same time, these notorious changes were matched by US Supreme Court decisions that seemed to add authenticity and cultural approval to many of them. Some of these included banning official prayer and Bible reading in public schools (Engel v. Vitale, 1962), the right to counsel for all (Gideon v. Wainwright, 1963), the right to know your rights (Miranda v. Arizona, 1966), a clarification of free speech (Tinker v. Des Moines, 1969), limits on government involvement in private schools (Lemon v. Kurtzman, 1971), legalized abortion in the first trimester (Roe v. Wade, 1973), and limits on the confidentiality of presidential communication (USA v. Nixon, 1974).

As could be expected, the subgroup of fundamental conservatives, the *fundamentalistic conservatives*, quickly responded with an untested and fairly unknown cast of characters that have since become household words in the USA – Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, and Phyllis Shlaflly, to name a few. While diverse in background and skill, they were unified in their defense of what they defined as "the traditional Judeo-Christian values." They were skilled at defining these values within the context of a simpler time set in rural and small town America. These values – Biblical authority in all areas of life, faith in Jesus Christ, a lifestyle based on Biblical values – were shared in a manner that granted them broad appeal beyond just the *fundamentalistic conservatives*. So wide was the appeal that George Gallop declared 1976 as "the year of the evangelical." Even national news magazines ran cover stories about the rapid rise of evangelical Protestantism. The mainline churches, on the other hand, seemed confused and demoralized by this phenomenon as the ranks of their own members were shrinking.

The present – Today people in the USA are living with the results of over forty years of increasing success on the part of the *fundamentalistic conservatives*. They are being subjected to a massive and continuing religious, political, and social

assault on another set of long-held and highly esteemed values. These values are embodied in our US Constitution and extol the virtues of tolerance, justice and the rule of law, human rights, diversity, equality, freedom, social responsibility, protection of the environment, and strong families. In an attempt to return to some unidentifiable past, people are now subjected in unprecedented multi-media blitzes to “return God to our schools,” to return “Christian values to the Supreme Court”, to “restore government to the Christian values of our founders,” and the like.

For example, a few years ago the School Board in Dover, PA instituted a new policy requiring all ninth-grade biology teachers to read a statement on “Intelligent Design” before teaching evolution lessons. The district is believed to be the first in the country to require such a disclaimer. Shortly thereafter, however, a judge ruled the policy to be illegal. Studies, in fact, do show that American children are falling behind children in other nations in their knowledge and understanding of science. In 2011, for example, mathematics and science K-12 education students ranked 48th out of 133 nations worldwide, right behind Hungary.

During the past few years, the Texas Board of Education has been embroiled in several debates about school textbooks and how they treat evolution, the Constitution, and political ideologies. For a short time, the Board had a majority of *fundamentalistic conservatives* who insisted in prioritizing “intelligent design,” the assumed Christian perspective of our founding fathers, and the promotion of Republican ideologies. The chair and several of the most conservative members were not re-elected and the Board has since worked toward a more science and history-friendly perspective. Nonetheless, the actual language from a position statement in the 2012 Texas Republican Party Platform reads as follows: *Knowledge-Based Education – We oppose the teaching of Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) (values clarification), critical thinking skills and similar programs that are simply a relabeling of Outcome-Based Education (OBE) (mastery learning) which focus on behavior modification and have the purpose of challenging the student’s fixed beliefs and undermining parental authority.* (<http://convention.texasgop.org>) It appears that *fundamentalistic conservative* thinking continues to promote a significant fear of critical thinking. It is just a latest example of using the public policy sphere to allow science education to be watered down by zealots who seek to use our public schools as pulpits from which to teach ideology as fact, while denying teachers and students their basic right to religious freedom and scientific inquiry. Religion undeniably has its place in American society, but that place, according to the US Constitution, is not in the public schools.

Throughout this assault on USA Constitutional values, a primary Judeo-Christian value seems to have been lost – the ends never justify the means. It should be acknowledged that there are some who question the absoluteness of that value, citing situations where the importance of the ends might require questionable means. I leave it to others to continue that debate. I would remind those who question that value, however, that if one takes even the slightest step toward questionable means in order to achieve some exemplary end, where does one draw the line thereafter? In the case of the increasing number of political and religious *fundamentalistic conservatives* serving in our current federal and state legislatures, it appears that any means seem to be justified in search of the end – a theocracy where those in power determine what their god wants so that they might impose it on the rest of us. There can be seen no apparent acknowledgement that the Founder of the Christian faith taught and lived in a manner that decried power (the ability to coerce even against one's will) and replaced it with service – to God and to one another.

Concurrent with the rise of *fundamentalistic conservatism* came a very sad reality. The mood of the USA began to turn mean spirited. The public discourse and private social intercourse became increasingly hostile as individual anger rose. Part of this anger was and still is related to many of those changes in the world around us, and mentioned above, that challenge security, stability, and comfort. This is an expected part of such change. But what I am speaking of here is not the normal change inherent within any society, but the orchestrated and professionally engineered anger that has become a part of both public and private conversations. One can crisscross the country and see the same slogans shared in the same tone about the same issues that have come to provide the power base for these *fundamentalistic conservatives*. One can ask almost anyone on the streets and in similar language and with similar anger hear the ranting and railing about some of the elected leaders that seems very much out of proportion to the reality at hand. It is within this context that the word “liberal” as well as the word “progressive” have come to embody for some all that is wrong with the USA and most of the social institutions around which common needs are addressed.

Most of this has been accomplished by using communication strategies, and particularly propaganda devices, that distort, manipulate, mislead, deceive, and even coerce one's fellow citizens. They have used images, myths, symbols, fears, and statements to gain social and political control. They have moved beyond fundamentalism as a type or mode of religious belief to a system of mass

manipulation and political power, with an avowed aspiration to attain dominant control. And they have been very good at it.

Perhaps using propaganda devices as the primary example of how this can be and has been accomplished would be helpful. In the fairly recent past, most secondary and college level students in the USA learned about propaganda and how it can be used to subvert the truth. In most of the current textbooks that have been examined, any topics related to the use of propaganda rarely if ever appeared. Yet, the necessity for an informed and critically thinking public is an essential that our USA Founders championed. To help what seems to be a knowledge deficit, here are the most obvious and most used propaganda devices with examples of how the *fundamentalistic conservatives* have used them:

Name Calling – Without concern for the truth, this type of propaganda appeals to our fears, prejudices, and hatreds. Bad names or bad labels are given to individuals, nations, races, groups of people, ideas, or beliefs that the propagandist wants to condemn. For example, when Sean Hannity in his book *Deliver Us From Evil* said, “Liberals are more tolerant of Saddam Hussein than they are of George W. Bush,” he was name calling by suggesting that all liberals preferred Saddam Hussein over George W. Bush. Or when Glenn Beck said, “I beg you, look for the words ‘social justice’ or ‘economic justice’ on your church Web site. If you find it, run as fast as you can. Social justice and economic justice, they are code words,” he was name calling by suggesting that churches interested in the basic Christian values of social and economic justice were socialist or communist. Finally, calling President Obama a “tax and spend liberal,” when in fact he has consistently lowered taxes and spending.

Association – Here the propagandist attempts to establish a relationship between a person or idea and someone or something or an object or cause that people respect. Often the flag or church or Uncle Sam or an important person are used. For example, when George W. Bush once said that “I believe that God wants me to be president”, he was associating himself in a positive way with God. More recently, Michele Bachmann, congresswoman from Minnesota, said “God then called me to run for the United States Congress.”

Glittering Generalities – This is when propagandists identify themselves or their programs with highly loaded “virtue” words, usually appealing to love, loyalty, brotherhood/sisterhood, patriotism, honor, truth, freedom, etc. The desire is to get us to simply accept something without examining the evidence. An example would be when we are told that “It is the patriotic duty of this Christian nation to fight for democracy and freedom.”

The Bandwagon Technique – This is the “everybody’s doing it” approach. It’s purpose is to convince us to follow the crowd and accept something as a whole without examining the evidence. For example, the t-shirt that says, “Pro-Choice Christians? There Aint’ None!” In other words, make sure you are on the bandwagon of “pro-lifers”.

Testimonials – This technique is when a respected or hated person is used to say that a given idea or group or program or person is good or bad.

Repeating a Lie – We have all heard the old adage that if you repeat a lie often enough, people will soon believe it. All one needs to do these days is check numerous sources on the web to find daily summaries of lies told by numerous people about a variety of people. (www.foxnewslied.net, as one example)

The “Plain Folks” Technique – This is when the propagandist tries to convince people that her/his ideas are good because they represent everyday common people. This is the technique our former president, George W. Bush, used when he said that “they want the President, in this modern era, to be something they can relate to. Someone who they don’t think is intellectually intimidating. Someone who isn’t really lost in the big fog of intellectual ideas and the world of words.” In other words, he is saying that he is just a common person.

Card Stacking – This is selecting only those facts, real or imagined, that support the propagandist’s point of view. The daily White House press briefing is an example of this, as are most editorials.

Slanted Words – This technique is when one’s choice of words gives an imprecise or false meaning. For example, when Bill Clinton said that he “did not have sexual relations with that woman,” it turned out he clearly did have a sexual relationship with that woman. He tried to play games with the definition of “sexual relations” and it just got him into deeper trouble.

False Syllogisms – A syllogism is made up of two premises from which a conclusion can be drawn. In a false syllogism, the conclusion drawn from the first two statements is wrong. For example, (1) All liberals believe taxes should be shared equitably, (2) Karl Rove believes taxes should be shared equitably, (3) therefore Karl Rove is a liberal.

VIEWING THE WORLD FROM ITS ENDPOINT

What broad world view do *fundamentalistic conservatives* share? While most devout Christians throughout this planet seek to “live in the world, but not of the world,”

this brand of fundamentalists passionately pursues and embraces the material world with its technology and marketing strategies to support their manipulation. They reject good works as a part of a rejection of the “social gospel,” but esteem and highly exalt the economic and political gospels of republicanism, nationalism, and free-market capitalism. They seem to be much less concerned about the gospel of salvation for humankind and more concerned about using religion as a weapon in the ideological conquest of our country. They do not seem interested in influencing opinions and beliefs using reason and civil argument but rather seek the power to insist on their own opinions and beliefs through the tools of church and state. They seem experts at the propaganda device of telling a lie often enough until it becomes the “truth.” They just keep moving on knowing that they will soon be into another news story and the press will move on too and the public will forget the distortion and lies just perpetrated. They have learned well the tactics of the grade school playground bullies – whoever shouts the loudest and the longest wins. They seem to know that subtle and not so subtle forms of slander, bullying, intimidation, fear, and all sorts of dirty tricks will work.

To be more specific.... – Numerous recent books have already been written about how *fundamentalistic conservatives* view the world. The following is a brief summary of some of the basic concepts that provide the framework for their perspective on the world – a framework that helps to provide the energy, the goals, and the processes as they pursue the ideological conquest of America as mentioned just above.

1) The Second Coming, or the End Times, predominates much of their thinking. Essentially, they believe that the Bible details an accurate timeline leading to the end of the world as we know it. Followers of several varieties of current apocalyptic thinking (dispensationalists, reconstructionists, dominionists) link that timeline to such diverse things as 9/11, gay marriages, climate changes, and increased natural disasters. While details vary among its adherents, primary among their world view is the belief that Christ will only initiate His second coming when the world has prepared a proper place for Him. For them, the first step is in Christianizing the USA. To accomplish this, some of the Biblical prophecies are translated into political action. For the dominionists, this Christian domination would bring an end to the separation of church and state, the removal of all government social programs and replacing them with Christian church programs, and replacing the USA democracy with a theocracy ruled by Old Testament law. For the reconstructionists, one could add the removal of all government regulatory agencies because they distract from

the goal of Christianizing America. The goal is to conquer America for Christianity so that Jesus can finally return.

2) Another perspective of the *fundamentalistic conservatives* is that which originated in the Project for a New American Century (PNAC) in 1997. It is based on the example of Pax Romana (27 BC-180 AD) which is Latin for “the Roman peace.” Pax Romana was a period of relative peace experienced by states within the Roman Empire. The term stems most correctly from the reality that Roman rule and its legal system pacified regions, sometimes forcefully, which had suffered from war among rivals. It was not a peaceful era because rebellions were frequent. Nonetheless, most mischief was stopped and one could live also in peace as long as the Roman Empire was not challenged.

With this historical precedent, the PNAC developed policies designed to create “a new world order” which they labeled Pax Americana, or “the American peace”. Some of the most notable signatories were Richard Cheney, Jeb Bush, Paul Wolfowitz, and Donald Rumsfeld. This concept became official policy in late 2002 when the Bush administration’s first National Security Strategy was released. This 31 page document asserted American dominance as the lone superpower. It acknowledged and affirmed this status that no rival power would be allowed to challenge. It also said that the reason the world should accept this state of affairs is because it would provide for the expansion of peace and more freedom. A Pax Americana would be “in the service of a balance of power that favors freedom.”

At the time it was announced, critics described the new strategy as arrogant and dangerous, especially given the tone of humility in foreign affairs that President Bush promised in his inaugural address. To supporters, however, including the present-day *fundamentalistic conservatives*, it represented an overdue codification of America’s mission of global leadership. It provided a reason for “pre-emptive” war if that war would enhance freedom in the world. And, similar to all previous attempts at empire-building (Persian, Babylonian, Roman, Ottoman, Spanish, or British), they exploited religion to give their empire dreams divine legitimacy in the eyes of their true believers. Fortunately, by the end of 2006, the PNAC was a voice-mail box with a single employee to close its business and history.

3) A third building block of *fundamentalistic conservatives* is the belief that our society is involved in a cultural war. The cornerstone of this war is a major offensive against Christianity. They believe that the popular media constantly delivers this message. Further, they believe that such “intolerant and divisive views” that now prevail in our culture are initiated by and held by America’s self-professed intellectual elite and, especially, the left-wing radicals who control the Democrat

Party. They surely also believe that these views are held by a strong majority of the mainstream media. (Pew Research Center for People and Policy polls conducted over past years and to the present continue to show just the opposite – the media are conservative while the majority of Americans hold liberal attitudes on most social issues.)

They hold, correctly, that religious principles are fundamentally a part of our heritage. They wonder, then, why they are under such violent attack. Summarizing, they suggest two reasons. The first is that they are convinced that the goal of all liberals is to bring about a governmental system of state socialism. Liberals, in their opinion, believe that the state is to provide for the satisfaction of human needs instead of God and the individual. In fact, they believe that socialism requires that citizens show reverence and deference to the state as the god-like source from which all blessings flow. The supreme State can have no other god before it. A second reason is that they see what they define as lobbying interests and special interests seeking laws that make certain sins out to be virtues. These liberals seek the validation of the law, in the futile belief that the legal right to be wrong makes wrong right.

Finally, they define much of the USA judiciary as arrogant, with judges defining as bigotry those matters that they define as moral discernment. These same judges tell them that the Constitution does not grant them the right to establish the rules of civility and set the standards of decency by which they wish to live. In short, they believe that the US Constitution no longer protects them but has become, in the hands of unaccountable, power-corrupted judges, an instrument of their oppression.

4) The fourth area really blends a number of working concepts that provide understanding and meaning to the *fundamentalistic conservatives*. A primary concept is the understanding that the Western Judeo-Christian traditions have worked well for several centuries, so why change or revise them now? It is in changing the predominant cultural values and legitimizing alternatives that concerns are raised. A second concept is that for the *fundamentalistic conservatives*, it is not easy to differentiate between public and private areas of life. For example, it would be very difficult for them to support Roe v. Wade while holding a contrary private view. Third, they believe in certain moral absolutes that are as unchangeable to them as mathematical absolutes. These absolutes are value-based (the sanctity of an unborn life, for example) and so they assume everyone can clearly see them and should hold them too. Fourth, they believe that the proper role of government is to promote moral excellence, righteousness, and goodness. They do not believe that government's role is to interfere in the workplace or marketplace.

Based on these elements of their world view, and by various means, these *fundamentalistic conservatives* have become an intrusion into the lives of American citizens. One of the substantial historic changes their leaders have inflicted on the US population is that they have not limited their interests to religion. They have not stayed within the framework of US historical church-state relationships, but have fully engaged religious participation in politics. While lawyers and courts will continue to debate and decide on the meaning of the establishment clause (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . .”) of the First Amendment, the reality remains that the activities of this subgroup of fundamentalists have moved from the domain of private belief into the very open sphere of the public arena. They have made their brand of religion a very urgent public business. And again, the “demon” in all of this was variously defined as “modernism” (accommodation to cultural change) and “liberalism” (eagerness to engage change), and these designations were continually used to develop division and conflict between peoples. In reality, this process became the means whereby political and social debates and disputes were redefined in religious terms.

So here we are – We now find public debate formulated by fundamentalistic religious ideologies. This debate is often framed by supposed biblical arguments, using literalistic rhetoric and code words, couched in emotional terms, and mixed together with a new brew of patriotic, religious, and free-market zealotry. Not only that. What once began as a seemingly innocent exercise of tax breaks and other perks accorded non-profit and religious institutions, became the vehicle whereby they became media moguls. Mixing with those in the secular world that had been “converted,” they have now blended into private and public media power brokers who possess virtually every available means to enter into the privacy of our family rooms, our minds, and into our daily lives disseminating information with ulterior political and religious ends.

If we now limit our definition of *fundamentalistic conservatism* to those who currently hold political power in the USA, we would say that they are defined as opposing big government, abortion, gun control, environmentalism, affirmative action (a form of civil rights) and homosexuality. They do not, however, oppose everything; they are also defined as supporting religion in politics, school prayer, creationism (the current jargon term is “intelligent design”) and the military (at least with regard to spending, not necessarily serving).

If we define them by their actions, the definitions become much less clear. The most outspoken and angry among those who seemed to hate President Clinton have

had their own sexual lapses; the most righteous of the publicly righteous have also been tripped up by numerous common sins. They seem to have abandoned fiscal responsibility, breaking even President Reagan's record budget deficits. They are living one of the most remarkable position changes in our time, perhaps as important as the South's going Republican in the 1970s. They have been responsible through fiscal hemorrhaging to see the liberals replacing conservatives as the champions of fiscal responsibility. They have also abandoned smaller government by continuing to add to the federal payroll. According to Stephen Slivinski, director of budget studies at the Cato Institute (a conservative think tank), "President Bush presided over the largest overall increase in inflation-adjusted federal spending since Lyndon B. Johnson. Even after excluding spending on defense & homeland security, Bush is still the biggest-spending president in 30 years.

In addition, "Total Government spending grew by 33 percent during Bush's first term. The federal budget as a share of the economy grew from 18.5 percent of GDP on Clinton's last day in office to 20.3 percent by the end of Bush's first term." As for the activities of the Republican controlled Congress, they have "enthusiastically assisted the budget bloat. Inflation-adjusted spending on the combined budgets of the 101 largest programs they vowed to eliminate in 1995 has grown by 27 percent. The GOP was once effective at controlling nondefense spending. The final nondefense budgets under Clinton were a combined \$57 billion smaller than what he proposed from 1996 to 2001.

Under Bush, Congress passed budgets that spent a total of \$91 billion more than the president requested for domestic programs. Bush signed every one of those bills during his first term." During G.W. Bush's terms of office, not a single cabinet-level agency was smaller than when Bush assumed office. And then, Barack Obama was elected president. Even before he was sworn in, the rage, rancor, and dire predictions reached a fever pitch. Anything that was wrong was his fault. Immediately the Republicans began howling that the whole economic problem is the fault of President Obama, who exploded federal government spending the moment he took office.

Democrats, meanwhile, blamed the massive increases in federal government spending on the Bush years and the triumphant assertions by Republicans during those years that "deficits don't matter." In fact, federal government spending has risen under President Obama, mostly because of the \$800 billion stimulus designed to offset the massive recession he inherited from President Bush. But the increase in federal spending under Obama is dwarfed by the spectacular increase under President Bush.

The federal expenditures from 2000-2011, according to the St. Louis Federal Reserve, show that from 2000 to 2008, under President Bush, federal spending rose by \$1.3 trillion, from \$1.9 trillion a year to \$3.2 trillion a year. From 2009 to 2011, meanwhile, under President Obama, federal spending has risen by \$600 billion, from \$3.2 trillion a year to \$3.8 trillion a year. It has also now begun to decline. In short, federal government spending under President Bush increased 2X as much as it has under President Obama.

As for accountability, the blame always seems to lie elsewhere for the Republicans. They are bipartisan only when others agree with them. The only social security they seem interested in is that which would accrue to financial brokers should “privatization” of Social Security become a reality. In terms of peace, they appear to think that it is best attained by pre-emptive war and that staying the course means an unquestioned adherence to failed policies regardless of how bad the situation has become.

So, as the automobile bumper sticker asks, what exactly are the conservatives conserving? For the current *fundamentalistic* conservatives, economic conservatism is gone, and social conservatism is under unexpected attack by some of their own. What’s left that binds this fundamental brother/sisterhood together? What holds them unified in spite of violating most of the dearly held principles of conservatism? Robbed finally even of conservative doctrine, these *fundamentalistic conservatives* have a unique glue to bind them together. It is the thing that stands out in every setting, separates them from others, and remains after all those traditional values have fallen away. It is their anger. It is anger at a world that doesn’t fit their ideas about how the world ought to be. It is a world that continues to change in spite of their intimidation and shouting in the halls of the US Congress and over the many talk shows that give energy to it. It is an anger that is in the process of destroying the very power they have come to love, to use, and to abuse.

VIEWING THE FUTURE WITH HOPE

- So what might it be that can finally get US liberals and conservatives speaking to one another again? We know that most share many of the same values, principles, and beliefs that could draw them together. We know that it is un-Christian to close down the possibility of discovering practical and authentic truth in those with whom we disagree. Affirming this point brings both justice and charity and acknowledges that it is essential for any kind of inquiry. It is also a matter of good

judgment and enlightened self-interest to be open to the possibility of discovering additional or different truth in this manner.

Finally, it takes committing oneself to the understanding that there is risk in seeking to enter into the heart and mind of the person with whom one is conversing. Without taking that risk, however, one cannot work in the direction of a common good. A primary concern, then, continues to be the promotion and extension of civilized conversation among liberals and with conservatives. The phrase *civilized conversation* may seem rather cold and clinical, but it represents an essential means of human relating. When conversation descends to uncivilized behavior, the major priority is given to winning the argument, stilling or subduing the opponent, or simply coming out on top in some manner. Without civilized conversation, it is difficult to be at peace with diverse religious, political, or cultural groups. Without civilized conversation, maintaining peace among nations cannot be accomplished. In addition, uncontrolled biases make conversation impossible because they make listening with an open mind impossible.

It is only in the fairly recent past that the phenomenon of uncivilized confrontation has come to appear daily on US television screens. It is seen in various iterations of shouting matches, including between groups that are advocating causes that are in conflict. It is regularly seen between political, religious, and cultural cohorts.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

To honor Dr. Feleky Gabor, a social activist in his own right, I am taking the risk of sharing of a few ideas for gaining a better understanding of the events that have brought the USA to this place. I do so knowing that other societies are in the midst of suffering the same fate, albeit with different players and different histories. In all cases, some suggested responses as individuals are hereby offered:

- 1) Take the required time and attention to seek understanding about how one might separate information from substantive knowledge and substantive knowledge from ideology.
- 2) Seek to understand and engage the anxieties and ethical dilemmas that science has produced.
- 3) Engage in an active search of neutral information about the influence of secular humanism, state socialism, and propaganda on our cultures and societies.
- 4) Work hard to ameliorate sectarian strife that almost always endangers the freedom of everyone.

5) In the USA, the *fundamentalistic conservatives* have, though their activities, redefined USA Christians as a political/social movement. They have defined Republican values as the same as Christian values. As such, in the USA, church and state have become improperly blended. Become more aware of church/state relationships and the impact of alternative ways of addressing this cultural value.

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